

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Inclusive assessment approaches: Giving students control in assignment unpacking.

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Rationale for the case study

For widening access students and those from non-traditional backgrounds the transition into and through level 4 is a complex and important process (Nicholls, 2007, Briggs, 2012). One of the major areas of concern for students in their first year of higher education is successfully negotiating points of assessment (Tinto, 2006), which is known to generate a critical point for the retention of students. As writing academic assignments remains one of the most prolific forms of assessment in HE and the critical thinking this requires is core to the 21st Century curriculum (Barnett, 2014), it is important to eliminate barriers to student success that result from students negative perception of assignments and the accompanying assignment brief. The *WhatWorks?* initiative implemented at the University of Wolverhampton builds on the research above and that of McGinty (2011), who proposes that assignment feedback is crucial to level 4 students' sense of developing belonging in higher education, as it provides confirmation that they are on the right course and have the potential to be successful. The inclusive assessment initiative uses the criteria derived from the DiSA project (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) to provide a framework for accessible and comprehensible assignment briefs. It is also mindful of Dhillon & Oldham's (2012) findings that students circulate misunderstandings when they do not understand the assignment brief. Furthermore, it heeds Howell-Richardson's (2012) warning that students believe that assignment brief contain a hidden golden key, or trick question, that they need to be able answer correctly to successfully complete the assignment. Therefore, this initiative advocates a set of principles that encourages students to work in groups, take the lead in unpacking the requirements of the assignment brief and to discuss this with their lecturers. This is aimed at developing students' confidence in interpreting the assignment brief whilst also promoting the transparency of the brief to students.

This work is of further importance in relation to reducing the institutional attainment gap. The disparity between the percentage of students from minority backgrounds and their white counterparts who are awarded 1st and 2:1 classifications is a nationally recognised issue and is currently at 15.2% (ECU, 2015). The attainment gap at the University of Wolverhampton is problematic. In 2010/11 the disparity was 28% and, at the time, 10% points above the national average. As a consequence of this there is now focused attention on this issue. The inclusive assessment approach aims to increase the number of students achieving module grades of 50% or more, enhance student retention and increase students' sense of belonging – their level of social connectedness with their Faculty and the University. In doing so, the programme also aims to also narrow the attainment gap by further enhancing these activities for students categorised as BAME.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

The *WhatWorks?* programme at the University of Wolverhampton has focused on implementing and evaluating an inclusive assessment intervention which has included two stages. The first stage

involved reviewing the quality of assignment briefs against a set of evidence based criteria derived from the Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) Project (Cousin and Cureton, 2012), these guidelines include ensuring that the brief is:

- concise (one side of A4), provides a single location for all assignment information, uses appropriate to level and student focused language.
- provides information on the product as well as process of the assessment.
- refers to the learning outcomes, the marking criteria and where marks can be lost or gained.

The second stage involved the implementation of student led assignment unpacking session. These are structured around three principles:

- Students discuss in groups their understanding of the assignment requirements and feed these back to the group and the lecturer;
- Students are enabled to anonymously ask questions about what they do not understand, for examples by putting the question on a Post-it Note and placing it on the wall.
- Lecturers respond to the questions raised in the class and address any misconceptions in student understanding. This information should then be included in a Frequently Asked Questions thread in the VLE.

The approach adopted by the University of Wolverhampton aimed to provide clear guidelines that provided lecturers with a structure which they could employ in their classes in their own way, thereby providing a consistency in style. A number of delivery approaches were developed including the use of voting systems, the implementation of Socrative, role play, peer groups marking/feedback and 'mocked up work' to name but a few examples. .

Evidence of impact

Taking a centralised approach to evaluation, the University of Wolverhampton assessed its contribution to the *WhatWorks?* through both quantitative and qualitative means. The evaluation strategy drew on the Logic Chain Model thereby considers the activities delivered, the attitude and behavioural changes that were observed as a result, the impact of this on students' sense of belonging and how this related to improved retention and success. The differences in staff attitudes and behaviours were captured through interviews with the staff involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme. The student engagement data was captured in Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) sessions with students, while the impact of this on student belonging is captured in the cohort belongingness study. The improvements in student success are captured in the quantitative analysis of module outcomes.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative evaluation of the inclusive assessment initiative utilised the attainment figures for the modules involved in the '*WhatWorks?*' programme. This analysis included a comparison of current module performance to the performance in previous years. Where possible a comparison to comparative modules of the same cohort, where students have not experienced the intervention, was included. This revealed that there was a significant increase in performance to previous years in the numbers of students who gain 50% or more, with a marked difference to those students who gained 70% and above. There was also a significant reduction in the number of students who did not submit work for assessment. Where it was possible to find comparator modules, these changes were not observed. Of particular interest is that this approach impacted more significantly on

students from minority backgrounds who demonstrated improved grades in comparison to their white counterparts. This suggests that this initiative is a useful technique within the wider work the University is undertaking to significantly reduce its ethnicity based attainment gap.

Figure 1: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

50% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	37%	72%	74%	+37%
White	53%	61%	70%	+17%

Figure 2: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

60% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	18%	51%	55%	+37%
White	27%	34%	40%	+13%

Figure 3: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

70% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	14%	30%	35%	+21%
White	14%	19%	27%	+13%

Qualitative Evaluation:

Qualitative evaluations were carried out with both students who studied the modules where the inclusive assessment initiative was implemented and with the lecturing staff who implemented the initiative. The student data was collected utilising the Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) which educates and engages students with the issues being research and empowers them to provide information about the issue and make solution based recommendations. In this case, the latter stage of the process allowed the *WhatWorks?* team to work with students as co-creators in the further development the inclusive assessment curricula. The qualitative data collected from students indicates that students like the inclusive assessment approach, especially the assessment unpacking:

'I liked it [the assessment unpacking], doing it this way allowed us to unpick the bits of the assignment that we didn't understand without having to stop the lecture, you know, having to put your hand up and ask questions when you don't understand what they are saying' (Female level 4 student)

Students felt it encouraged their autonomy as learners: *'They [lecturers] keep saying we can't spoon feed you all the time – we don't want to be spoon fed, it's really hurtful when they say that. But when Dr. [name of lecturer] did the session like this it felt like we were in control, we were taking the lead*

in finding out what we needed to know to do the assignment. I left feeling that I knew what I needed to do to complete the assignment and that I could do it.' (Female, Level 4 student).

The approach also enhanced students' confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful:

'Yeah, it helps you feel like you know what to do and how to do it. I left feeling confident that I could get good marks in the assignment' (Female, Level 5 student) and *'I was going to jack it in but [friend's name] said come to the session, he's [the lecture] doing that thing again where we go through the assignment brief. So I came. Afterwards I thought I can do this, so I decided I'd stay and try to do the assignment.'* (Male, Level 4 student)

Students also felt that the approach provided a pathway for productive discussion about assignment requirements:

'It's hard when they [the lectures] do it the other way [deliver a didactic session on what they expect from the assignment] because you don't want to be the one who is always putting your hand up and asking the questions. But other people won't ask so sometimes you end up doing it just so that you're sure what's needed. But this way you don't have to worry, you just put the questions on the post-its, everyone was doing it and when he [the lecture] read them [the questions] out, you thought, that's a good one, I didn't think about that, so other's questions help you too.' (Male, Level 5 student)

'By doing it [discussing the assignment requirements] this way you have discussion about the assignment that feels normal, you know, you're not putting your hand up asking. Everyone is talking about it and it feels okay to discuss what this means and what that is asking you to do.' (Female, Level 4 student)

It is proposed that the latter may open the door to more productive learning relationships between students and lecturers (c.f. Cousin & Cureton, 2012).

The data gathered from lecturers was collected through an open ended questionnaire and interviews. This evaluation indicated that staff who have implemented this initiative were surprised at the increased engagement of students when this method is used to discuss assignments.

'I was surprised at the level of engagement in this activity, usually they [the students] will ask one or two questions and that's it. This time there were lots of varied questions. The students seemed to like it and, as I said, very engaged.' (Male lecturer)

Lecturers were also surprised at the apparent mismatch of expectations surrounding the accessibility and comprehensibility of the briefs that they produce.

'There were questions that surprised me, I thought they'd know what about that by now, but quite a few didn't seem to know. It's been a good exercise and I have reflected on what was asked and what changes I need to make to the assignment brief' (Female Lecturer)

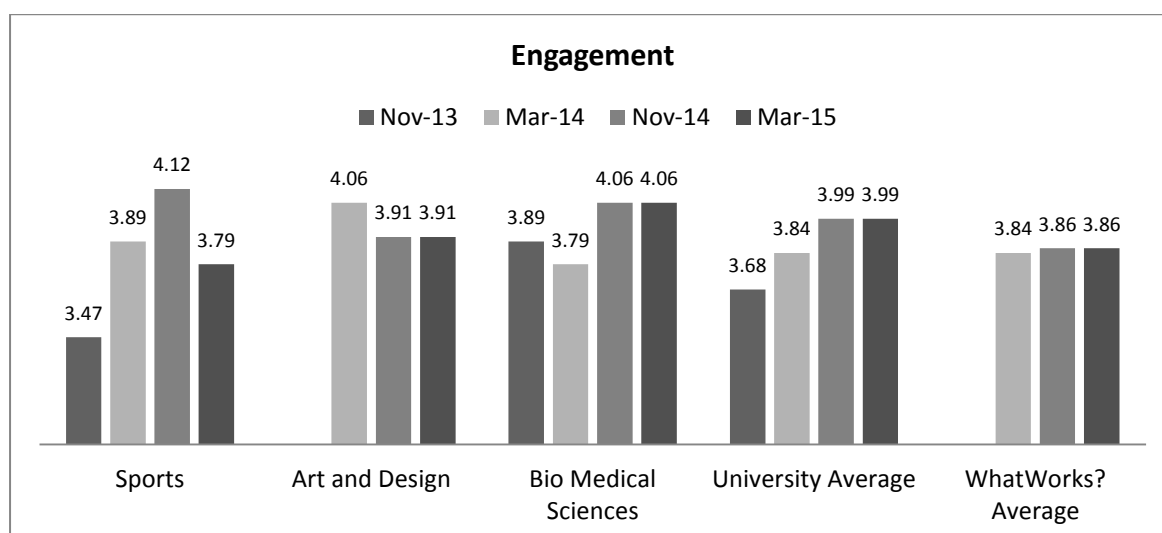
Lecturers also noted a marked decrease in the students who requested one-to-one tutorials to discuss what an assignment brief was asking them to do; some lecturers comment on the increase in discussions about assignment content within tutorials.

'What I also noticed is that students aren't coming to SAMS [personal appointments and tutorial] asking about what they need to for their assignment. And those who do come are talking about the theoretical and technical aspects of their work.' (Female lecturer).

Belongingness Data

To capture aspects of students' belonging to their department and/or University, the students who were involved in the WhatWorks initiative also took part in a cohort belongingness study. The *WhatWorks?* team administered Mantz Yorke's Belongingness questionnaire twice a year, over a two year period to the students who were involved in the pilot discipline areas (Sport Sciences, Bio-Medical Sciences and Art and Design). The questionnaires were administered in November 2013, March 2014, November 2014 and March 2015, therefore capturing changes in the belongingness of this discrete group of students over a two year period as they transitioned into the University and through level 4 and level 5. The main themes in the data suggests that there is an increase in UW students' self-reported engagement over the period of the initiative which was greater than that of seen in the average responses of students from all the *WhatWorks?* HEIs.

Levels of Student Engagement over the *WhatWorks?* Programme shown by pilot area, University average and *WhatWorks?* Average.



Engagement questions:

1E I am motivated towards my studies.

5E I try to make connections between what I learn from different parts of my programme.

6E I try to do a bit more on the programme than it asks me to.

8E I seek out academic staff in order to discuss topics relevant to my programme.

10E I put a lot of effort into the work I do.

12E I use feedback on my work to help me improve what I do.

Sustainability

The work that has been part of the *WhatWorks?* programme has been embedded at institutional level through its use in to support the enhancement of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012-17). The *WhatWorks?* programme has also generated heightened awareness that student belongingness plays a role in student success. This has led to belongingness being considered as part of other cross-university initiatives and developments such as the University's on going work to improve personal tutoring. Embedding of the initiative has also occurred at Faculty

level. Firstly this has occurred through the *WhatWorks?* initiative being incorporated into cross Faculty initiatives, for example the work has influenced some support approaches offered by the Graduate Teaching Assistants and Graduate Interns. Moreover, it has been incorporated into Faculty initiative such as 'Assessment Cafes'. Secondly, the inclusive assessment approach has been embedded at course level, having been rolled out in different ways in each participating Faculty. A systematic approach has been adopted by the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, where the initiative has been rolled out across the Institute of Sport and a two year plan has been developed for rollout across the whole Faculty. This Faculty has engaged Institute Attainment Champions who will be responsible for rolling out and embedding of the *WhatWorks?* initiative in each of its other discipline areas. The Faculty of Science and Engineering has embedded the inclusive assessment process as part of their peer review process. This method is proving effective in raising awareness of the initiative all Schools within the Faculty. The Faculty of the Arts has embedded the inclusive assessment approach into all levels of education within their Photography courses and their Textiles and Design courses and have provided a two year sustainability plan. The only Faculty not to have a discipline area involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme was the Faculty of Social Sciences. After negotiations, the Faculty will commence the rollout of the initiative from the academic year 2015/16. The future roll out of the *WhatWorks?* initiative have been considered. The rollout and sustainability of the programme is written into the three year work plans of two of the University of Wolverhampton's Learning and Teaching Fellows. Further progress towards the embedding and sustainability of the work is witnessed in the collaborative working relationship between the University of Wolverhampton and its Students' Union. The Students' Union has included student success and the reduction of attainment in their most recent 5 year plan, they have made a commitment to hold an Annual Summit with the University, the reduction of attainment gaps is written into the job descriptions of all SU Officers and the current team of SU Officers are actively awareness raising about the 'ways to be a successful student'. In addition, the University of Wolverhampton has invested into further strategically supported work to increase student attainment and reduce attainment gaps.

Learning and reflection on the process

A very important lesson learnt from this project is having a single initiative is very powerful. This was not the approach taken by the other 12 Universities in the Change Programme and therefore the University of Wolverhampton's approach provided an interesting perspective to the programme. This approach was found to have benefits, especially in terms of evaluation, embedding and making strategic impact.

The major lessons learnt from this work within the University are that senior management support is crucial. Having support from senior University leaders, who advocate the benefits of the programme, provides extra kudos to the work and encourages people to listen. Senior management support within the Faculties is also crucial. Having Associate Deans and **Principal Lecturers** who acted as champions for the programme was also very important to the success of the project; they not only advocated the benefits of the initiative to support the rollout, they provided the project with a voice within Faculties, as well as instantly troubleshooting problems or barriers to rollout and embedding.

Having discipline level advocates for the programme who were responsible for piloting the initiative and driving the programme rollout was extremely facilitative. The discipline leads provided the programme with validity in eyes of their colleagues and helped to ensure that the approach was discipline competent. Moreover, the layered implementation approach, which was discipline led

and driven but supported by Faculty management and institutional leadership, led to the initiative not being view as a wholly top-down process and being more readily accepted by teaching staff.

Finally, it is crucial for projects such as *WhatWorks?* to be located in an area of the organisation which focuses on academic development and pedagogic research. This not only gives the work perceived legitimacy, it provides access to a community of practice to help support the development of the work and networks to support its rollout and embedding. This also provides the project with the opportunity to feed into the University governance structure and therefore provides the project with a voice.

References

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